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Daryl Grigsby
Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

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Daryl Grigsby
Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University (Berkeley, CA)

Abstract
This paper provides a brief overview of the gifts of the Black church and contributes advice for white Christians who are serious about dialogue with their African-American faith partners. The continued invisibility of the Black church for white Christians undermines a credible Christian witness and ensures Christianity in America will be delinquent in matters of racial equity and social justice. The Black church emerges from a set of historical conditions that enable it to hear and respond to the presence of God in a way that produces unique gifts, especially in the form of prophetic tradition and speaking truth to injustice. The Christian religion would do well to stop viewing the Black church as a marginal part of its tradition, but rather as a co-creator of its faith.

Introduction

One of the definitive characteristics of Christianity in America, and indeed one of its greatest tragedies, is that white Christianity worships, lives, and acts as though the Black church does not exist. Seventy years after Ralph Ellison's classic *Invisible Man*, for white Christians, the Black church continues to remain invisible. Historians John Hope Franklin, Carter G. Woodson, Henry Mitchell, and others termed slave Christian gatherings *the invisible institution*. Two centuries after slavery's end, the Black church remains unseen, unheard, and unheeded by white Christians. This is to the detriment of Christianity in America, for the Black faith story holds gifts that could renew the American church.

Defining Black Church and its Rich History of Prophetic Thought and Truth-Telling

For a host of historical and sociological reasons, religious faith in the Black community has always been deeply prevalent. On the certainty of God's existence, sixty-one percent of whites were absolutely certain, compared to eighty-three percent of Blacks. Seventy-five percent

of Black respondents said religion is very important in one's life, compared to forty-nine percent of whites. Forty-seven percent of Blacks attend church weekly, compared to thirty-four percent of whites.[1] I argue that given the depth of faith in the Black community, the white church can learn from and emulate the Black Christian faith experience. But, firstly, what is the Black church?

Black church and white church are *broad* terms, each holding a wide spectrum of doctrine and practice. A white, evangelical mega-church differs greatly from a Quaker fellowship, and a Black Catholic parish is different from a storefront Holiness church. Despite the differences and given the common history of slavery, systemic racism, and white supremacy faced by the Black community in the U.S., I argue that there are enough commonalities to speak broadly of a Black church and a white church. According to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence M. Mamiya, eighty percent of Black Christians are in the "seven major historic Black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), the National Baptist Convention USA (NBC), the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA), the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)."[2] While these denominations represent majority-Black worshipping populations, my definition of Black church also includes Black worshippers in white Catholic and Protestant churches. Wherever there are Black Christians, there is a Black church.

The failure of white Christianity to learn from its Black partners in faith has serious consequences, for it robs white Christians of wisdom derived from centuries of experience where

[1] "Religious Landscape Study: Racial and Ethnic Composition," *Pew Research Center*, 2014, accessed January 29, 2021.
[2] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

believers depended not on political power, economic security, or racial privilege, but instead on God alone. Exodus, incarnation, cross, and resurrection have different meanings among Black Christians. James Baldwin writes "the church I come from… is not at all the same church to which white Christians belong. [We do not] speak the same language or share the same hope."[3] One can argue that the white church in America has never recovered from its complicity with slavery from 1619 through 1865 or with the white supremacy that survived slavery and continues to this day. Further, C. Eric Lincoln and other historians have argued that the white church's complicity with slavery's violence, rape, and degradation rendered it unchristian. Consequently, the only truly Christian body in America for two centuries was the Black church, a church paradoxically invisible yet under attack.

White churches generally are not seen as contrary to American values or a threat to white supremacy. White churches have the privilege of uncritically flying American flags near the pulpit or altar, celebrating Memorial Day like a religious ceremony, and seldom speaking with force or power to the demons of racism or nationalism. While white churches sit comfortably within the American paradigm, Black churches, especially in the South, were and are subject to hate crimes and burnings: notable instances include the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 and the Emmanuel AME Church massacre in 2015. In December 2020, white nationalists vandalized two historically Black denominations in Washington, D.C. No such act would happen to a white church, whose theology and practice do not pose a challenge to America's social values. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone argues that reconciliation to God in practical terms means that white Christians in America must become Black. To become Black means that white Christians' hearts, souls, and minds must become one with the oppressed

[3] James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 841.

through concrete acts of solidarity.[4] The continued comfort of white Christianity in the wake of continued anti-Black violence indicates that solidarity has not yet occurred, a fact most evident in the recent U.S. presidential election.

M. Shawn Copeland notes in *Knowing Christ Crucified* that "chattel slavery led Christianity to a crossroad: discipleship or duplicity."[5] She elaborates the ways in which white Christian churches domesticated the gospel to fit the needs of slavery. There were, of course, exceptions to this, with Quakers, Mennonites, and faith-inspired white abolitionists being among the most notable. However, many white Christians were and are too compromised by their allegiance to white supremacy and American nationalism to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 2020, we again came to Copeland's crossroad, and white Christians again overwhelmingly chose duplicity. According to Pew Research Center surveys, in November of 2020, seventy-eight percent of white evangelicals, fifty-two percent of white Catholics, and fifty-three percent of white non-evangelical Protestants cast a ballot for a man who unapologetically stands for white supremacy.[6] His lies, narcissism, blatant sexism, and fear and hate mongering are matched only by the racists who advised him. While white Christians continue to sit in the comfort of white supremacy, xenophobia, and nationalism, the Black church has developed, through centuries of struggle, a deep awareness of God's prophetic utterances against structures that degrade human life. In this way, prophetic virtue is not new for the Black church.

This prophetic voice was evident in the 2001 sermon by Revered Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. The sermon, taken from Psalm 137 and titled "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall," was condemned, mocked, and castigated by most of white America,

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[4] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 151.
[5] M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2018), 9.
[6] Gregory A. Smith, "White Christians Continue to Favor Trump over Biden, but Support Has Slipped," *Pew Research Center*, October 13, 2020.

churches included. The media played on endless loop a few sentences from Wright's sermon. None took time to hear the entire sermon, which closed with a call for self-examination, personal responsibility, social transformation, and spiritual adoration.[7] Black Christians heard his sermon as consistent with the tradition and ministry of the Black church. The most recent presidential election and forgotten sermons are but a few examples of how the prophetic struggle for justice that has been a part of the Black church for centuries has been neglected as a part of our shared Christian tradition.

Speaking God's truth to injustice is also a fundamental component of the Black church that can serve to be a gift to all Christians. Maria Stewart, David Walker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth are but a few truth-telling co-creators of God's reign in the world. C. Eric Lincoln argues that the Black church originated in the slave's experience with God in the midst of unmitigated suffering. He wrote:

> "For the Black believer, the Black church was not only a symbol of God's intention that all men should be free, it was also the instrument of God's continuing revelation of that intent. In the Black church, while God's love was unqualified, God's challenge was also unconditional, for he called every man to realize the highest potential of his humanity by being a living testament of the divine image in which he was cast. Since God himself was free, and man was created in his image, then man's struggle must ever be to maintain or recover the freedom with which he was endowed by his Creator. [God is the] first endorser of any struggle for liberation."[8]

Lincoln's insight, though clouded in the patriarchal language of the times, describes the foundations of the Black church. These foundations are a true gift that the whole church can benefit from. Evidence of life transformed from exposure to the Black church is seen in Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His book *The Cost of Discipleship* and his legacy of opposition to Hitler and Nazism are famously revered in the Christian tradition. More unknown,

[7] Martha Simmons, and Frank Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W Norton, 2010), 862.

[8] C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984), 63.

however, is his growth through the influence of the Black church. Reggie Williams's *Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* notes that when Bonhoeffer arrived in Union Seminary from Germany, he was uninspired by the white churches he visited. Eventually, his fellow Union Seminary colleague Albert Fisher brought him to Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. There, he met a Black Jesus who actively comforted and liberated his suffering. Williams notes that Bonhoeffer witnessed the dialectical ecclesiology of the Black church as a seamless harmony of "a 'priestly' ministry attending to the inner life of Christians and the 'prophetic' church engaged with the political and social concerns of justice and equality and freedom."[9] These foundational Black liberationist authors[10] could offer the same degree of inspiration to the wider Christian community. They are part of a rich tradition of Christian thought that is often neglected on traditional syllabi and yet that has many gifts to share. While Black Christians remain overwhelmingly Protestant, there is value in turning specifically to the gifts of the Black Catholic experience.

Black Catholic Faith: Not to Be Forgotten

The Catholic Church, the single largest denomination in America, includes a small but vital Black presence of three million members.[11] Black Catholics who continue in the faith despite obstacles importantly legitimize the Catholic claim to be a universal church. At Seattle

[9] Reggie Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and An Ethic of Resistance* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 89.
[10] Other sources upon which the church can draw are James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, and *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody.* And not to be neglected is Gary Dorrien's two-volume history of Black faith titled *The New Abolition: W.E.B. DuBois and the Black Social Gospel* and *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King and the Black Social Gospel.* Also ready to share gifts and stories are Reverend Pauli Murray, the first African American woman to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, Mahalia Jackson's music ministry, Nannie Helen Burroughs' service through the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, and the political mysticism of Howard Thurman.
[11] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "African American Affairs" Accessed December 11, 2020, usccb.org/committees/african-american-affairs/demographics.

University School of Theology and Ministry, I created an oral history of Black Catholic elders who remained faithful despite overt discrimination. They talked concretely of past indignities, such as priests uttering racial slurs or of being restricted to the the back and receiving the Eucharist after white parishioners, amongst other overt acts of racism. Each said they remained because they experienced God in the Catholic Church, and no flawed human was going to take that from them. In Black Catholics, we see the presence of resilience and the universality of the Catholic faith.

Black Catholic struggle includes the courage of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. These sisters were Black nuns who faced racism and ridicule from white Catholics yet persevered to minister to the needs of poor Black people in urban areas. Daniel Rudd created the *American Catholic Tribune,* the first and only national Black Catholic newspaper. He also created the still vibrant National Black Catholic Congress. Sister Thea Bowman's ministry of proclamation, service, and music energized the Catholic Church in America. Cyprian Davis summarized much of this legacy in *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* as well as Diana Hayes in *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States.* These voices in religious life, news media, and liturgical ministry compose a great deal of the pastoral gifts of the Black Catholic church. Although Black Catholics are comparatively small in number, their voices should be listened to and uplifted as true members of the body of Christ given their courageous character. In the ways mentioned in this section, Black Catholics represent a distinct and important part of the wider Black church that should not be forgotten or erased.

Conclusion

Ironically, by ignoring the Black church, it is really the white church which is invisible and absent in many ways from God's struggle for human justice and dignity. The Black church is not better than the white church, nor are Black Christians better than white ones. No human being is better than another. The Black church, like all of us, is not perfect, infallible, or free from error. The Black church does, however, emerge from a set of historical conditions that enable it to hear and respond to the presence of God in a way that produces unique gifts, especially in the form of prophetic tradition and speaking truth to injustice. The Black Catholic experience provides an important point of reflection on universality and courage within the faith. The Christian religion would do well to stop viewing the Black church as a marginal part of its tradition, but rather as a co-creator of its faith. This paper has named a great deal of theologians and ministers to whom the church can turn. The gifts of the Black church are, to borrow a Catholic Eucharistic prayer, for our good, and the good of all God's holy church.

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